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ABSTRACT

A brief description of standard procedures used in training counselors is presented, and their net effect explained. The author feels that when the student counselor begins practicum, he is burdened with semi-crippling expectations of how he is supposed to do counseling according to a rigidly held, inadequately known theoretical counseling model. The need for a pre-practicum simulated counseling experience is next discussed. Such an experience involving 30 master's students, working in groups of three which meet two or three times a week in conjunction with their Theories of Counseling course is described. The three students interchanged and enacted the roles of client, counselor and reactor. Emphasis was placed on the utilization of the behavior change principles of role playing and shaping. These as well as the goals of pre-practicum training are fully discussed. The effects of both techniques are presented. The paper concludes by acknowledging that the description of the pre-practicum experience was observational and without experimental, back-up data, but that initial indications were that it is a fruitful approach deserving of further research. (TL)

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An Application of the Behavior Change Principles of Role Playing and Shaping to the Training of Counselors[1]

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Standard Training Procedures in Counseling

Training in individual counseling typically involves a procedure in which the student-counselor is exposed to theories concerning the nature of human behavior: that is, how behavior is acquired, maintained, and modified. In addition emphasis is placed on theoretical models of counseling: that is, how clients grow through counseling and how the counselor is supposed to behave in order to achieve therapeutic changes. The student-counselor reads counseling session transcripts and case histories, listens to counseling sessions conducted by a "master" counselor, and superficially reads one or more counseling and personality theories. Prior to practicum, the student-counselor's educational diet consists of theoretical models of counseling and human behavior, rather than consisting of experiences in simulated counseling situations. The emphasis then in most programs is on how a counselor is supposed to behave rather than on experiencing how counselors actually do behave. (Whiteley and Jakubowski, in press)

Effects of Standard Training Procedures in Counseling

There appear to be several effects that may occur as a result of this emphasis on theoretical counseling models without a concurrent emphasis on simulated counseling experience. One effect seems to be that the student-counselor often believes that his practicum experience expects him to identify with a particular theoretical counseling model. This expectation seems to result in

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a premature identification with a counseling model which has a consequent effect of limiting exploration of other counseling approaches.

A second effect may be on the student-counselor's expectations of how he is to conduct himself in counseling. It often seems as though student-counselors expect their counseling to be a carbon copy of the theoretical model they have adopted. Thus, by the time the student-counselor starts practicum, he is often semi-crippled by his fears of doing an inadequate job, inadequate often being defined as doing something that is prohibited by the counseling model or not doing what is prescribed by the model.

A third effect seems to be that the student-counselor develops a limited, inaccurate understanding of the counseling model he has adopted, since his exposure to theoretical models is more often cursory than in depth. For example, student-counselors who adhere to the Rogerian model often initially believe that a counselor should assume a passive, reflective posture and not question, probe, or react to the client. Student-counselors often misinterpret the behavioral model and take a literal interpretation of the "therapist as a social reinforcement machine" (Krasner, 1962) to mean that the counselor always gives advice and hands out homework assignments.

The net effect is that when the student-counselor begins practicum, in addition to the usual insecurities of doing counseling, he is burdened with semi-crippling expectations of how he is supposed to do counseling according to a rigidly held, misconceived theoretical counseling model.

Need for Pre-Practicum Simulated Counseling Experiences

The practicum supervisor is generally able to help broaden the student-counselor's repertoire of counseling approaches, to help develop a personally

effective counseling style, and to clarify misconceptions about theory. However, in working towards these goals the practicum supervisor is virtually limited to discussing the counseling sessions retrospectively - after the session has ended. This has the effect of retarding the progress that is made since the supervisor usually cannot directly assist the counselor during the counseling session. The supervisor and counselor may retrospectively analyze the counseling session, but often the preformulated plans are inappropriate because the needs of the client at that moment are different than were anticipated.

The process of assisting the student-counselor in developing confidence, a personally effective counseling style, and a greater understanding of theory needs to be accelerated through pre-practicum simulated counseling experiences. Such experiences could lessen the likelihood of a premature identification with a single counseling model, increase confidence and trust in oneself, broaden the counselor's repertoire, and correct some misconceptions about theory. In short, it could facilitate the growth the student-counselor experiences in practicum by increasing his readiness for working with real clients.

A Description of a Pre-Practicum Simulated Counseling Experience

A class of approximately 30 master's students was organized into groups of 9 to 12 students. The groups met two or three times a week in conjunction with a Theories of Counseling course which was the last of two courses taken prior to practicum. When each group met, they were further divided into three-man groups. In each three-man group, one student played the role of a client, the second student played the role of a counselor and the third student played the role of a reactor.

The client was instructed to enact a problem which she had either encountered herself or of which she had intimate knowledge. Prior to starting simulated

counseling the client informed the counselor of her age and referral status - a self referral, teacher, parent, or principal referral, or unknown referral.

The reactor was instructed to respond to the counseling process whenever she wished to bring the counselor's attention to the effect he was having on the client, to suggest additional counseling approaches, or to add her impressions of what the client was attempting to communicate. The reactor was encouraged to stop the counseling process at any point and give her reactions. If the counselor could not execute the suggestions or understand them, the counselor and reactor switched roles and the new counselor was instructed to demonstrate her suggestions. The counselor and client could also stop the counseling process and comment on it.

The counselor was instructed to counsel as he felt was appropriate. He was not given directions to follow any theoretical model.

On every occasion there were three or four three-man groups engaged in simulated counseling at the same time in one large room or in adjoining rooms. I was also present and moved from group to group as the need arose. I also acted as a model and occasionally role played the counselor when this seemed to be desirable.

The Behavior Change Principle of Role Playing in Simulated Counseling

Role playing is a behavior change principle or proceudre in which human social responses are developed and modified in a dyadic or group situation. Role playing (in the therapeutic, experimental, or training sense) involves instructing the individuals to reproduce the behavior of a model. In the simulated counseling experience the client reproduced the behavior of a real-life client, the reactor reproduced the behavior of a generalized model of a reactor, and the counselor reproduced the behavior of a generalized model of a counselor.

Role playing has been found to be an effective method of developing and modifying human behavior. For example, Wolpe and Lazarus (1966) have used it to develop and modify assertive behavior while Bandura and Walters (1963) have used it in various ways to modify the behavior of children.

In the simulated counseling experience role playing was used to help the counselor practice those counseling skills he would later use in practicum. The role playing of a simulated counseling session seemed to have several effects:

1. When students played the client role, they experienced some of the feelings and reactions which clients experience in counseling: anger in being forced to reveal oneself too quickly, irritation when the counselor talks too much and listens too little, and the like. Experiencing some of these reactions seemed to help the student-counselor to greater understand and appreciate the client's feelings. This seemed to help the counselor become more sensitive to the client and thus react to the client more appropriately.

2. When students played the counselor role, they received immediate feedback on how their behavior affected the client. This appeared to help the counselor develop more confidence and increase his understanding of the counseling process. The immediate feedback also had the effect of simulating such discussions as when I'm afraid to make mistakes, I pay more attention to my fear than to the client; I noticed that I held back from asking that question because I thought that that wouldn't be right according to Rogers, but I felt uncomfortable the whole time.

3. When the students played the reactor role they experienced thinking clinically and creatively about the counseling process. They began to learn how to evaluate this process. The reactors showed surprising sensitivity in being able to clearly evaluate the counseling. Their reactions were clear and perceptive. The reactors also probably experienced some vicarious learning through observing the counselor-client interaction.

Even though this simulated counseling experience did not involve real clients, it did seem to have meaning to the people who participated.

The Behavior Change Principle of Shaping in Simulated Counseling

Shaping is a behavior change principle or procedure in which behaviors are gradually modified or changed through a series of successive approximations in

which those behaviors are reinforced which are more nearly similar to the final desired behavior and those behaviors which are less similar to the final desired behavior are not reinforced. The requirement for reinforcement is gradually raised in the direction of the final form the behavior is to take. Shaping has been found to be an effective method of developing and modifying a wide variety of human behavior. For example, it has been used to shape cooperative responses (Hingtgen, Sanders, and Demyer, 1965), to treat school phobias (Patterson, 1965), and to control excessive verbalizations (Jakubowski, 1969). Usually the behaviors which are successively reinforced and the final desired behavior are clearly specified. However, in this simulated counseling experience, the behaviors which were reinforced in a successive fashion could not be so clearly specified. This is particularly true of the final desired behavior of the counselor responding comfortably and appropriately to the client. Instead of being one specific behavior, the final desired behavior consisted of a class of behaviors which I labeled as being appropriate for the client at that particular moment. In the simulated counseling experience, shaping as a behavior change principle was used to shape counseling behaviors in successive steps toward the final goal of the counselor reacting comfortably and appropriately to the client. Not all counselors reached this final behavioral goal.

The first step in the shaping procedure involved training the student-counselors to start and end the counseling session and arrange for further contacts if these were desirable. This involved the following behaviors: the counselor introducing himself, ascertaining the client's name, determining the circumstances of the referral, determining why the client came, rounding off or closing the session, and making plans for future appointments. Although the student-counselors were nearly ready to take practicum, they initially either did not know how to start and end a counseling session and arrange for future contacts, or else were too anxious to be able to use their knowledge.

During this first step, reinforcement consisted of noting the reasons why their approaches were probably effective, commenting on the comfortableness with which they carried out these behaviors, and commenting on the growth they were experiencing.

The second step in the shaping procedure involved training the student-counselors in using nonverbal cues to communicate to clients. This involved such behaviors as keeping eye contact with the client and moving closer or further away from the client. These behaviors were reinforced in the fashion I described earlier. At this time the students started giving support and encouragement to each other in the counseling sessions.

The third step in the shaping process involved training the student-counselors to more closely listen to and understand the client. Unfortunately, these behaviors are not clearly specifiable. At this point the reactor and client became reinforcing agents for the counselor. They provided the majority of the reinforcement through their reacting to the counselor's approaches and providing feedback on the extent to which he was "reaching" the client. In addition the counselor also reinforced himself when he felt that he made a "connection" with the client. During this time and throughout the remainder of the shaping procedure, the student-counselor's "growth" in the process of counseling was emphasized rather than emphasizing his limitations as compared to a perfect counseling model.

The fourth step in the shaping procedure involved training the counselors in responding to the client more appropriately and comfortably. Once again these counselor behaviors are not clearly specifiable. By this time the student-counselors were generally more sensitive to their effects upon the client and to their own feeling reactions to the client. The student-counselors discussed their reactions to the counseling with relative ease in their small groups.

Once again the feedback from the client and reactor were important in helping the counselor to learn to react more appropriately and comfortably with the client. Peer reinforcement in the form of encouragement and support was important in the shaping procedure.

The shaping procedure which was used in simulated counseling seemed to have several effects:

1. At each step of the shaping procedure, the students could strive toward a counseling behavior which they could reasonably expect to achieve. This may have helped to build feelings of competence.

2. This approach seemed to have the effect of isolating the difficulties that the counselor could expect to occur in practicum. For instance, some student-counselors learned that they had difficulty in being too anxious to set the client right, or that they wanted to cure the client for him, or that they were perceived as being distant.

3. It is possible that this pre-practicum experience helped the student-counselors to become more open and ready for practicum supervision, since they had to some extent learned to accept suggestions from others and to evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses.

Summary

In summary most training programs in individual counseling emphasize theoretical counseling models without a concurrent emphasis on experience in simulated counseling situations. This kind of training approach may have various negative effects such as a premature identification with a counseling model and semi-crippling student expectations of how one is supposed to conduct counseling according to a rigidly held, misconceived theoretical model.

Since the practicum supervisor is virtually limited to a retrospective analysis of counseling sessions, progress in helping the student to develop a personally effective counseling style and to clarify misconceptions about theory is retarded. A pre-practicum counseling experience could conceivably accelerate the student-counselor's growth in practicum.

A pre-practicum simulated counseling experience which utilized the behavior change principles of role playing and shaping was described and its apparent effects were observed and commented upon. This approach appears to have good potential even considering its limitations. The usefulness of the approach, of course, is dependent on the ability of the reactors to helpfully respond to the counseling process, on the ability of the client to convincingly portray a client, on the ability of the counselor to become involved in the role playing, and on the ability of the students to be open with one another. Furthermore, these simulated counseling experiences were conducted with role playing students and not real clients in counseling situations which were usually of first sessions rather than on-going continuous sessions.

At this point, the description of this pre-practicum experience is solely observational and has no hard experimental data to back it up. However, it does appear to be a fruitful approach which should be further explored through research.

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